

A Response to Richard Leo

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A Response to Richard Leo

KAI ERIKSON

All I know about Richard Leo's research is what he himself wrote in his *American Sociologist* piece. I said in my commentary that he "flat out lied," but I did so because he wrote that he had "invented" personal traits, engaged in "pretenses," and deliberately "misrepresented" himself to other people while pursuing a "chameleon strategy." I said that he had taken part "in a degree of deceit that is more widely known in espionage than in social research," but I did so because he described himself as acting in a way "well known to confidence men setting up their marks." I implied that he was using a disguise, but I did so because he wrote that he had "adopted" postures not his own, "embraced" manners not his own, "feigned" politics not his own, "affirmed" values not his own, and, in general, "fabricated" a persona not his own. If I am mistaken in any of the above conclusions, then I have misread the text and apologize for doing so.

As for the rest, I can be brief. I would not characterize Professor Leo's research as "undercover" or "covert," and I do not think I used those terms. Whether he "disguised" himself or not is a matter about which we may disagree, but it was the "deception" I took exception to, as I hope I make clear, and we should both be comfortable with that term. (My mention of Leon Festinger, incidentally, was meant as a note in passing, not as an "example" of anything; and I would certainly insist, if there is any doubt about the matter, that the deceit I was prepared to engage in forty years ago was more unethical by a huge margin than the misrepresentations Leo describes in his report. I don't see any comparison at all.)

Professor Leo is quite right to chide me for referring to other "professional conversations" without being more specific on the matter. So, if allowed to, I will just withdraw. My reason for bringing up the subject in the first place, as it happens, was to make my complaint a more general one and not to focus it entirely on Leo. Other people do what he did, after all, and I wanted to suggest that my argument is with them as a group rather than with him as a person. An awkward effort, I admit.

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Professor Leo is also quite right to point out that whether one fieldworker spoils a research opportunity for another is an empirical question. I just assumed that people who learn from a published report that they have been “manipulated” and “conned” will feel somewhat humiliated as a result and will thus be less likely to welcome future researchers. But I really do not know whether that is true or not in this case, and I should not have jumped to such conclusions. Time will tell.

Our biggest disagreement, and Professor Leo puts it well, has to do with whether “the moral standards of a fieldworker may be different than the moral standards by which we judge human beings in daily life.” Professor Leo thinks I misunderstood him here, and he may be right. But the issue seems to be clearly enough drawn. I do not see why the moral standards by which we conduct research should be different from the moral standards by which we judge other human activities. “Moral absolutism” may be a fair description of my view on that matter. Professor Leo, if I understand his argument, is willing to at least entertain a more flexible standard when research efforts might otherwise be stalled. That’s a real difference. I *do* appreciate the difficulties of gaining research data under the circumstances in which Leo found himself, and I also appreciate that if we are too tidy and circumspect in our research behavior we will have a harder time getting “hidden and dirty data.” I just don’t think we should *do* research that requires deliberate misrepresentation and deception at all. “Moral absolutism” again. Professor Leo, clearly, thinks that some research is important enough to justify the use of deception, and that, too, is a real difference.

It happens that Professor Leo and I have been in touch over the phone during the last several months, sharing our thoughts on these matters and discussing the possibility of co-chairing a session at the next ASA meeting devoted to the issues we have raised here. Is it ethical for field workers to misrepresent themselves in order to gain entry to a research scene in which they might otherwise not be welcome? And, if so, what types and degrees of deception are justifiable? In what circumstances might they be appropriate? By what criteria should they be evaluated? Those are good and important questions. I cannot think of anyone better equipped intellectually and ethically for contributing to that discussion than Professor Leo, and I would be very pleased if he thought the same of me.